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15. ON A NESTING PAIR OF TAILOR BIRDS (*ORTHOTOMUS SUTORIUS*)

On 11-vii-1973 a newly started nest of the Tailor Bird was found in my backyard in Tri-vandrum, Kerala State. It was completed on 15-vii. The first egg was laid on 17-vii, and two more eggs, laid at twentyfour-hour intervals, completed the clutch. One of the eggs hatched on 31-vii before 0658 hrs, another some time between then and 1410 hrs on the same day, and the third some time before 1400 hrs on 1-viii. All three nestlings left the nest on 13-viii, one by one, at 0655, 0805, and 0815 hrs.

Assisted by two of my grown-up children, I watched the nest for a total period of 128 hours through doors and windows 1.5 to 3 metres away. On 6 days (21-vii, 31-vii, 3-viii, 6-viii, 10-viii and 12-viii) a dawn-to-dusk watch was maintained. Details of behaviour were noted down on the spot.

Some of the more interesting observations are given below¹:

1. Although the male was seen carrying a few down-feathers towards the nest, once on 10-vii- and once on 12-vii, only the female was seen at work on the nest. On no other occasion was the male found bringing nest material. The discovery of the nest was due to the fact that at 0930 hrs on 10-vii the male was seen offering

a few tiny, white down-feathers to the female who was behaving like a juvenile begging for food. Instead of putting the feathers into her mouth, the male flew down towards the nest. No other incident suggestive of courtship-feeding was noted.

2. During nest construction most of the work was done between 0730 and 0900 and again from 1530 to 1630 hours.
3. On 16-vii (the day before the laying of the first egg) no bird was seen near the nest at any time.
4. After laying the first egg the female never visited the nest on that day.
5. The second egg was laid between 0635 and 0638 hrs on 18-vii. The nest and eggs were left alone till 1840 when, for the first time, the female came to sleep in the nest.
6. The male took no part in incubation, nor did he ever feed the incubating female.
7. The period between the laying of the first egg and the hatching of the first nestling was 14 days (c. 336 hours); that between the commencement of incubation (presuming that incubation started at 1840 hrs on 18-vii when the female settled down in the nest for the night) and the hatching of the first chick was 12.5 days (c. 300 hours). However, the way the female was sitting suggested that the two eggs then in the

¹Details of nest-structure will be dealt with in another note.

- nest need not have been in contact with her body. She was sitting high up in the nest, rather like a lid, and had not pressed herself down as was her practice on subsequent nights. Regular incubation definitely began in the morning on 19-vii.
8. During the incubation period, periods of incubation and of absence from the nest more or less balanced each other. The dawn-to-dusk observations of 29-vii showed that:
 - (a) between 0635 and 1750 hrs the female brooded 25 times (average duration 13.68 mins).
 - (b) between 1200 and 1300 hrs periods of incubation and absence were both very brief (maximum in both cases 6 mins).
 - (c) between 0635 and 1138 hrs the average duration of incubation was 15.5 mins, and of absence 16.5 mins; between 1306 and 1750 hrs these were 18.2 and 13.1 mins respectively.
 9. The female brooded the nestlings frequently in the day-time during the first four days after hatching. The last instance of diurnal brooding was of 16 minutes' duration (1740 to 1756 hrs on 3-viii), but she continued to sleep in the nest for 5 more days.
 10. The female spent the night in the nest on 22 days, 9 of which were after the eggs had hatched.
 11. Both male and female began feeding the young regularly soon after the first egg hatched. On the first day, however, it was the female who did most of the feeding. On the whole, male and female shared the task of feeding equally. The average number of feeding trips, based on the observations of 90 hours, are: male 6.34 times, and female 6.88 times per hour.
 12. Between 2-viii and 13-viii, on 8 days the longest interval between 2 feeds occurred in the afternoons; on 5 days it fell between 1700 and 1800 hrs. On the last two afternoons (11-viii and 12-viii) it was between 1420 and 1500 hrs.
 13. Feeding frequency increased with the age of the nestlings. From 113 times on 3-viii, it rose to 233 times on 2-viii.
 14. Only twice or thrice were the parents seen consuming the food brought for the nestlings. This was always in a context of disturbance by human presence. More often, however, even when people were present, the parents would wait till the coast was clear or, overcome by the feeding urge, go and feed the young. On 12-viii and 13-viii the male was the first to come and feed the chicks in the morning (at 0614 and 0621 hrs respectively). The first feed of the day did not involve any special display.
 15. Both parents attended to nest sanitation; but the male was seen carrying away faecal sacs more often. There was no rhythm or pattern in the voiding of faecal sacs. At times a number of visits would pass without the appearance of a sac, while sometimes parents would be removing a sac on each of two or three consecutive visits.
 16. Although male and female had favourite routes to and fro, when transporting faecal sacs they flew off in many different directions. This should have helped distribute the conspicuous white globules over a wide area, preventing a clear trail from developing and so guiding a predator to the nest.
 17. What the parents did with the faecal sacs could not be discovered. Just once an adult was seen thrusting a faecal sac into the gap between two roof-tiles about 10 metres

away from the nest.

18. The adults never indulge in any sort of distraction display.
19. The behaviour of this breeding pair suggested that they had little territorial sense.
20. Nine minutes after the last of the 3 nestlings had left the nest, the female came to the nest with a small grasshopper. After looking many times at the nest, she flew off still carrying the insect. Three minutes later she came again with food, alighted on a plant 1 metre away, looked at the nest and flew off. At 0939 hrs she came once again with food, alighted close to the nest and soon flew off.
21. The nestlings were quite silent as a rule till the day they left the nest. But on 4-viii one uttered a feeble *cheep-cheep* when the parent was leaving after a feeding trip. The next time a chick was heard calling was at 0614 hrs on 13-viii, when one had slipped through an opening at the back of the nest and was clinging on the outside. It uttered a low *chweek*. Then, at 0620, for the first time a chick was heard responding to an adult's call with a low *chweee*.
22. One of the most surprising and exciting incidents occurred on 7-viii. I happened to press the nest at a point 4 or 5 cm below the rim of the nest-cup. At once there

came a loud, frightening rasping hiss from within the nest. When other parts of the nest above and below this point were pressed no such response was elicited. But every time pressure was applied to this part of the nest, the young (only one at a time apparently) hissed.

23. This pair of Tailor Birds did not subject their fledglings to a 'hunger period' in order to induce them to leave the nest. Only the last of the fledglings to leave the nest had to be lured out of the nest by the offer of food from a distance.
24. Even after the first fledgling had left the nest, the parents continued to feed the remaining two for more than an hour without any appreciable change in the frequency of feeding.
25. The nest was not used by the juveniles as a roost after they had flown.
26. The behaviour of this pair of Tailor Birds differed from the account given in the HANDBOOK (1973) in that:
 - (a) incubation was solely by the female;
 - (b) the male was never seen feeding the incubating female;
 - (c) the nestlings were practically silent till the day of their first flight.

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